

**A NOTE  
ON THE RECONSTRUCTION  
OF THE  
HERSTORY OF SEXUALITY  
AND SEX WORK  
IN SONAGACHI, KOLKATA,  
WEST BENGAL, INDIA**

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Well: should property and pauperism exist? Should marriage and prostitution, family and familylessness exist?

All these conditions have developed into their opposites and, only through the greatest of lies and illusions could these be treated as simply positive states of affairs.

- Karl Marx 1844-47/1998 : 142-143.

Human civilization presently handles human sexuality under conditions of patriarchal family and familylessness, through the institution of marriage and, through the sex sector. Together with the rise of property and status differentiation (like *class* in Central and Western Europe and, *caste* in India) there appeared unpaid labour and, sporadically, also wage labour. In the absence of archaeological evidence it has been conjectured on the basis of literary evidence and ethnological data (Engels 1884/1990: 174), that simultaneously there arose professional sex work of free women, side by side with unpaid sexual services. Here it may be mentioned in passing, that among the Romans, the word *famulus* meant a household slave and, the word *familia*, from which the word *family* is derived, signified the totality of slaves belonging to an individual (*ibid*: 166). "The modern family", wrote Marx, "contains in embryo not only slavery, but also serfdom... It contains within itself in *miniature* all the antagonisms which later developed on a wide scale within society and its state" (Marx 1880-81/1974: 120).

Modern sex work, is a form of service sector wage labour, performed under conditions of ever increasing commoditization

of all goods and services, within the currently expanding system of global capitalism. Throughout herstory the various modes of production, reproduction, distribution, consumption, pleasure and, recreation have contested with one another, within the overarching norms of patriarchy. It is in the context of these contestations that marriages develop into commoditized sex work and, relatively stable sex worker-client relations develop into marriage-like bondage. Our familial-religious ideologies are engaged in justifying, perpetuating and maintaining various myths and lies around these modes of management of human sexuality. This is the universal story, but therein the story of each civilization has its own specifics.

It is common ground that the present system of capitalism and its civil society emerged in Central and Western Europe. This system and its individual rights oriented civil society was imposed upon the people of India, mainly by the British Imperialism. Prior to that, our tribal and caste divided civilizations had several types of civil societies of their own. The *Arthashastra* (Kautilya 1992: 223-52, 265-74, 281-87, 294-303, 324-56, 369-91, 392-445) and, the *Kamsutra* (Vatsyayana 2002 : 131-160) bear testimony to the existence of rule governed contractual relations, including commoditized sexual relations, in ancient India (see also: Chunder 1970 ). Subsequently, the ancient Indian civil and political societies were crossed with several Central Asian and peripheral Iranian strains of the same. Finally, some European colonial powers – Portugal, France and, mainly England – crossbred some colonial Eurasian civil societies and states in India. The herstory of our sexuality and sex work is unfolding inside this larger herstory of continuous articulation of our civil and political societies, that straddle several social time zones – from that of the pre-agricultural hunter-gatherers to that of the netizens – here and now, in the Republic of India.

## I

The story of the people of Indus Valley Civilization (c.3000-1750 B.C.), the oldest evidence of urbanization hitherto discovered in our subcontinent, continues to be reconstructed. These people had contacts with ancient Mesopotamia. They had governments, religion, ports, dry docks, shipbuilding yards and,

planned towns with paved roads. So there must have been people with surplus income, migrant workers, traders, sailors and soldiers – all of them potential customers of sex workers. However, no direct evidence has so far indicated anything about the management of sexuality or about the existence of a sex sector there. The script of this civilization remains undeciphered till date.

The *Rig Veda* (c. 1200-900 B.C.) is the first ancient Indian sacred text that contains references to sexual desire (10/129/4-5), marriage (10/85), polygyny (1/62/1, 10/145, 10/160), extra marital affairs (1/117/18), incest (10/10, 10/61/5-7), polyandry (9/5/27, 5/17/8-9) and, sex workers (1/167/4; 2/13/12,15,17; 4/16/19,30; 4/19/9); (see also: Bhattacharya 1988 and Sur 1995). This textual evidence shows that the various familial and marketized forms of management of human sexuality were already in vogue at that time. Some of our first sex workers operated from our temples. They were called *Devadasis* (Bayaderes). The Yogimara Cave (Ramgarh hills, Madhya Pradesh) Inscriptions (c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C.), indicating the existence of *Devadasi* Sutanuka, happen to be the earliest archaeological evidence about the existence of sex workers in India,

There are some major religions in the world wherein sex was/is considered to be a sin. In the ancient Indian sacred and secular texts, however, pleasure – including sexual pleasure (*Kama*) – was considered to be one of the three main aims of human life; the other two being *Dharma* and, *Artha*, roughly translatable as religion/basic principles that hold life together and, power in conjunction with wealth, respectively (*Manusmriti*: 2/224, 7/27, 7/151-152; The *Ramayana*: 1/6/5; The *Mahabharata*: 14/37/15; *Kumarsambhava*: 5/38; *Arthashastra*: 1/7; and, *Kamastura*: 1/1; 1/2). The *Shatapatha Brahmana* (10/1/8; 11/3/2/1) and, the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* (1/4, 6/4) contain detailed description and discussion of the various aspects of human contact, touch, penetration, sexual intercourse and related issues. Apart from the Vedic discourse on sexuality, we have the Tantric discourse that venerated female sexuality. These were parallel traditions that influenced one another. Both the traditions had / have numerous sects. There were even non-Hindu – Buddhist and Jain – Tantric sects. A Tantric text, the *Kularnabtantra*, defined sexual intercourse as the meeting of

supreme energy with supreme consciousness (5/112) and, compared the Vedas and the Puranas (Hindu mythical lores) with the ordinary sex workers – who are accessible for all and, the secrets of the Kaula Tantric lores with the housewives – who remain hidden, beyond public gaze (11/84-85). The Tantric tradition, though patriarchal, shows greater respect toward female sexuality. Even when high Brahminical Hinduism became more hypocritical, as it came in contact with Victorian England, various Tantric sects secretly continued their worship of female sexuality.

In the *Arthashastra* (c. 300 B.C. – 150 C.E.), the oldest extant Indian text on power and wealth, sex work has been treated as a well-established form of service sector labour, the topmost layer of which was not only approved, but even organized by the state. What is more, services of the *courtesan deluxe* were considered to be paradigmatic for the entire entertainment sector; the officer in charge of the sex sector looked after the wellbeing of the entire entertainment sector. Some parts of Europe came slightly closer to this ancient Indian attitude to sex work for a short period, only in the Middle Ages, when at Toulouse the profits from brothels were shared between the City and the University and, when in England the bordellos were first licensed by the bishops of Winchester and later on by the Parliament (*The New Encyclopaedia Britannica* 1987: Vol. 9: 737: 2a).

The *Kamasutra* (c. 3<sup>rd</sup> century C.E.) of Vatsyayana Mallanaga is the oldest extant Indian text on pleasure and, on erotic love. In Vatsyayana's own words: "Pleasure, in general, consists in engaging the ear, skin, eye, tongue and nose each in its own appropriate sensation, all under the control of the mind and heart driven by the conscious self. Pleasure in its primary form, however, is a direct experience of an object of the senses, which bears fruit and is permeated by the sensual pleasure of erotic arousal that results from the particular sensation of touch" (Vatsyayana 2002:8). Scholars opine, that this text was composed sometime after 225 C.E. It is one of the main sources of our knowledge about the social conditions in India at that time. Hence, the text is, in a sense, its own context. The cultural context here is urbane and cosmopolitan, with a real consciousness of the possible regions of *Bharatavarsha* (India). It is a kind of pre-imperial consciousness, setting the stage for the Gupta Empire

that would dominate *Aryavarta* (North India) from the fourth century to the sixth (*Ibid*, Introduction: xi-xii).

Vatsyayana argued that, since a man and a woman depend upon one another in sex, it requires a method, and this method may be learned from the *Kamasutra* (*ibid*: 9). The *Kamasutra* was based on the works of many authors who preceded Vatsyayana, authors whose texts have not come down to us: Auddalaki, Babhravya, Charayan, Dattaka, Ghotakamukha, Gonardiya, Gonikaputra and Suvarnabaha. Vatsyayana cites them often, sometimes in agreement, at others in disagreement. The *Kamasutra* was neither the first, nor the last Indian text that is, in defiance of Michel Foucault's taxonomy, at once an *ars erotica* and a *scientia sexualis*. It has been followed by the *Kuttanimata* of Damodar Gupta (8<sup>th</sup> century), the *Kalavilasa* of Kshemendra (11<sup>th</sup> century), the *Nagarasarvasva* of Bhikshu Padmashri, the *Panchasayaka* of Jyotirishvara (11<sup>th</sup>-13<sup>th</sup> century), the *Ratirahasya* of Kokka (prior to 13<sup>th</sup> century), the *Kamasamuha* of Ananta (1457), the *Ratiratna-Pradeepika* of Devaraja (15<sup>th</sup> century), the *Shringaradeepika* of Harihara (15<sup>th</sup> century), the *Anangaranga* of Kalyanamalla (15<sup>th</sup> century) and, the *Shringaramanjari* of Ali Akbar Shah (17<sup>th</sup> century). A few Sanskrit glosses and commentaries on the *Kamasutra*, like the *Kandarpachudamani* of Veerbhadra (1577) and, the *Praudhapriya* of Bhaskara Nrisimha (1788), are known to exist in libraries, in the manuscript form. The *Jayamangala* gloss of Yashodhara Indrapada (13<sup>th</sup> century) is, however, the only one that has been published. There are several published commentaries on the *Kamasutra* in modern Indian languages too. These include a Tamil (1924), a Telugu (1924), a Bengali (1927), and, a Hindi (1964) commentary. For a comprehensive bibliography in English, see: Vatsyayana 2002.

The above bibliographical account traces the chronological evolution of our *classical theoretical attitude to sexuality*, as it found expression in texts on erotic love and in commentaries on them. What is the end product of this evolution? Let us take a look at one example. According to Devadatta Shastri, a 20<sup>th</sup> century Hindi commentator on Yashodhara's *Jayamangala* gloss on Vatsyayana's *Kamasutra*: "On reflection, it appears that all of human life is permeated by sexuality. That is why the Vedas and the Upanishads too give examples of sex between

man and woman. The ten sections on sleeping together in the *Rig Veda* correspond to various types of sex discussed in the *Kamasutra*. The text does not deal with an improper subject or science. From a spiritual viewpoint, too, the universe in all its variety is essentially sexual. The chief component of sex is attraction and, of attraction – sex. Attraction toward respected elders appears in the form of faith, devotion and other similar sentiments. Among equals, the same attraction appears as friendship and comradeship. Toward inferiors, attraction takes the form of compassion and kindness; toward children – that of affection. The same sexuality is manifested as maternal sentiment in the mother's heart, as lust in the lover's embrace and, as compassion toward the poor and the suffering. All of these are forms of one basic emotion related to sex – attraction or sexuality. That is why the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad* says, 'Man is sexual'. Sexuality is the semen of the mind" (Vatsyayana 2002, Appendix: 173). This is a modern Hindu traditionalist understanding of sexuality, exposed to some of the currents of Western sociological and psychological thoughts. For a contemporary western and a partially westernised Indian understanding of the Hindu views on sexuality see: the entry on *Hinduism* in Bullough and Bullough 1994 and, on *India* in Francoeur 1997-2001.

On the question of sex workers/courtesans, the *Kamasutra* is singularly sublime. It contains an entire Book of six chapters on the courtesans (reportedly written at the request of the courtesans of Pataliputra), where we find descriptions and prescriptions about: deciding on a friend, an eligible and an ineligible lover, getting a lover; giving the beloved what he wants; ways of getting money from him, signs indicating his cooling passion, ways of getting rid of him; getting back together with an ex-lover; weighing different kinds of profits; calculating the gains and losses, consequences and doubts and, the types of courtesans. Vatsyayana was of the opinion that kings and sex workers were people with identical life goals. He wrote: "When the three aims – *Dharma*, *Artha* and *Kama* – compete in human life, each is more important than the one that follows. But *Artha* is the most important goal for king – because it is the basis of social life – and, for a courtesan. *Artha* is the means of achieving the three aims of life" (*Kamasutra* 1/2/14-15).

Ancient India accepted many forms of erotic love. In the *Kamasutra* we read that the people living in the eastern part of the land did not prefer oral sex, though those living further north or west did not worry about anything when they made love (2/9/29-30). Vatsyayana pointed out the reality of and, the need to take care of female orgasm (2/1/10-31), long before the arrival of the more recent Western texts on that theme. He also noted the existence of male and female homoeroticism and, of transgender sexuality (5/6/1-4; 2/6/46-47; 2/9/25-41) in India of his time.

Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, foremost *Kamasutra*-scholars in the Anglophone world of our time, are of the opinion that the *Kamasutra* can be viewed as an account of a psychological war of liberation that took place in India about two thousand years ago. The first aim of this war was to rescue erotic pleasure from the hegemony of reproduction (Vatsyayana 2002: Introduction: xxxix). Its second aim was to civilize raw and explosive sexuality, to teach that pleasure like production needs to be cultivated, that in the realm of human sexual pleasure, nature requires culture (*ibid*: xli-xlii).

Despite its awareness of the interrelationships of violence and sexuality, the erotic tone of the *Kamasutra* happens to be one of lightness. The text belongs to the literary climate of the first six centuries of the Common Era in India, when the erotic was associated with all that was bright, shining and beautiful in the world. The Sanskrit dramas and poems of that period are also characterized by an eroticism that is more hedonist than impassioned. The *Kamasutra* both reflects and fosters woman's enjoyment of her sexuality. It may not be a mere coincidence that the first Sanskrit text in praise of the Goddess, the *Devimahatmya* was also composed around that time. Vatsyayana and the later authors of the *Kamasutra* genre may be viewed as champions of sexual pleasure in an era when the Buddhist view that equated the god of love with Mara or Death was still influential. They may also be viewed as the inheritors of that materialist aesthetics of the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, wherein sexual love is usually a down to earth affair of desire and its gratification.

Women in the *Kamasutra* are sexual beings with feelings and emotions. Book Three on Virgins instructs the man on a young girl's need for gentleness. Erotic pleasure demands that

the man be pleasing to his partner. In recommending that the man not approach the woman sexually for the first three nights after marriage, using this time to understand her feelings, aim at her trust, and arouse her love, Vatsyayana took a great leap forward in the herstory of sexuality in India, by introducing the notion of love in sex. He also considered love-marriage to be the best form of marriage (3/5/30).

That the sex worker is a normal human being, capable of love and deserving love, has been recognized in the descriptive and prescriptive texts like the *Kamasutra*, and in 'high' literature like the *Mrichhakatika*, *Kathasaritsagara* and, *Kalavilasa*. The legendary courtesans of the land – like Amrapali, (a direct disciple of Siddhartha Gautama the Buddha), Shalabati, Basabdatta, Madhabsena, Vilasbati, Kumudika, Basantasena and many others right up to Umrao Jaan of Lucknow under British rule – are remembered even today. Many, if not most, of our classical music and dance forms owe a great debt to our sex workers – Devadasis, courtesans – for their survival and development. Like every other social transaction in India, the status of the sex workers was determined by the caste status of their clients. It still is. The high society courtesans / companions did / do grace public ceremonies, of the civil and political societies together with their celebrity clients. The poor and illiterate sex worker catering to the unskilled, illiterate, 'low' caste, migrant labourer was / remains an object of scorn and neglect.

Scholars have located about 50 synonyms of the word collocation 'sex worker' in Sanskrit and Pali literature. Some of these exude respect, even reverence: the Rig Vedic *Agru* (4/19/9) – a single woman who moves freely like a river; *Brajayitri* (*Shuklayajurveda/Bajasaneyi Samhita* 30/2) – the woman who provides happiness; *Nagarashovini* – the woman who lends grace to a town and, *Janapadakalyani* – the woman who takes care of the welfare of the settlement (*Jataka* 1/43). In the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata* (c. 6<sup>th</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C.), as well as in the *Puranas* (c. 400-1000 C.E.) or the ancient mythical lore such synonyms grew in number. There we have: *Swairini* – a fearless housewife who openly entertains her customers at home; *Swatantra* – an independent woman; and, *Swadhinajoubana* – a woman who handles her youth independently. The Sanskrit

texts *Arthashastra* and *Kamasutra* and, the Pali texts *Majjhimnikaya* and *Sanjuttanikaya* bear testimony to the existence of state funded education and state sector employment for the *Ganika* – the *Courtesan deluxe*. The state provided them with some pension on retirement and, strictly controlled their contractual commitments. Below the *Ganika*, were the *Rupajiva* – the woman who lived by their beauty. They were either self-taught or their mothers/clients took care of their education. Below them were others, some of them part timers. The poorest among them, hailing from the 'lowest' *Varna*/castes, hardly had any education or security. The *Ganika* and the *Rupajiva* paid income tax. They sometimes worked as spies and, could be released if the king so wished or if someone else bought their release from the profession.

For any observer of the contemporary Indian sexual culture, the world of ancient Indian sexuality and sex work described above is a world gone long ago and, perhaps, in a galaxy far away. The first European translators of the *Kamasutra* (French: Isidore Liseux 1883 and, Piere Eugene Lemairesse 1891; English: Richard Burton and F.F. Arbuthnot 1893; German: Richard Schmidt 1897; Italian: Antonio Velini 1945 and, Russian: Alexander Y. Syrkin 1993) found in this text an welcome ally in their campaign for sexual pleasure against the reigning church / state lore that sought to subordinate, if not altogether eradicate it in the service of a patriarchal reproductive goal. For them the *Kamasutra* was the product of a place and a people who had once raised the search for sexual pleasure to the status of a life goal. Like many things about ancient India, the modern Indian re-discovery of the *Kamasutra*, followed in the wake of the European discovery of it. The first modern Indian edition of the text came out in 1891, eight years after its first French edition of 1883.

In the intervening millennium and a half since the days of Vatsyayana, our attitude to sexuality went down the hill and, our sex workers – once regarded as normal, even respected, human beings capable of and deserving love – became objects of scorn and hostility. A part of the reasons for this decadence may be attributed to northern and central Indian civilisational decline and, de-urbanization after the age of the Imperial Guptas: yet others may be traced to invasions by and subjugation under some militarily superior but culturally more primitive Central

Asian people – like the Sakas, Huns, Turkomans, Pathans and Mogols. *The reasons behind the decline of our sexual culture remain un-investigated by the social sciences. The contours of our present day sexual pluri-culture also await mapping.*

At the high noon of our sexual multiculturalism, around c. 2nd century C.E., the *Manusmriti*, with a sort of counter-enlightenment vengeance, argued against the acceptance of gifts from sex workers (4/209) and, put them in the class of open thieves, together with bribe takers, frauds, shady traders of all sorts, smooth operators and, those great ministers and doctors who behave with impropriety (9/250). Women in general came to be called gateways to hell. Manu was of the opinion that: lesbians should be fined, whipped, their head should be shaved, two of their fingers should be chopped off and, they should be made to ride on a donkey; women engaged in extra-marital relations were to be thrown before dogs to be eaten and, their male partners were to be burnt on a red hot iron bed (*Manusmriti* 8/369-372). The cult of monastic celibacy and corresponding hypocrisy was in ascendancy. The domains of men and women were strictly segregated. The situation was so unbearable that some dissident Buddhist monks and nuns revolted. They said that if the aim (*Avippaya*) of *Dharma* is one (*Eka*), then men and women should not be segregated (Sen 1935). This one aim (*Ekavippayi*) sect of Buddhism was very small, however, their influence upon the underground religio-sexual culture of the land was transmitted through the various trends of Tantric Buddhism – *Vajrayana*, *Kalachakrayana* and, especially *Sahajayana* (Bhattacharya 2004).

The eastern part of the land in general and Bengal in particular has always been an important centre for the cultivation of the Tantric lore. The authors of the proto-Bengali texts – the *Charyachryabinishchayah* (10<sup>th</sup>/11<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) – Meenanath, Luipada, Kanhapda and others were Buddhist Tantrics. All the Hindu and Buddhist Kings of Bengal patronized various Tantric sects. The Tantric circles of Bengal constantly interacted with the high Brahmanism imported from North and West India during an entire millennium (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. – 5<sup>th</sup> century C.E.) and, continuously reiterated the importance of the *Sahajiya* (easy/natural) modes of worship, that sought religious experiences through the senses, especially, through human sexual love. The

divine romance of Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu) and his consort Radha was celebrated by Jayadeva, the 12<sup>th</sup> century author in his *Gitagovindam*, wherein religiosity is locked in lovers' embrace with human sensual attraction, estrangement, yearning and reconciliation. Songs from the *Gitagovindam* continue to be sung in the course of daily personal prayers, in temples, during festivals and, at *Kirtan* ceremonies (communal worship through song and dance). 15<sup>th</sup> century poets Chandidas and Vidyapati continued this tradition. Shree Chaitanya and his followers (15<sup>th</sup> – 16<sup>th</sup> centuries) further explored the parallels between divine and human love. They elevated *Parakiya* (non-legitimate) love above *Svakiya* (legitimate/conjugal) love, as the more intense of the two. *Parakiya* love is felt without any consideration for the conventions of the society or for personal gain and, hence it is considered closer to divine love. Radha (wife of a maternal uncle of Krishna) is conceived by the *Vasinava-Sahajiyas* to be the ideal of the *Parakiya* woman. Even the male devotees are encouraged to assume the attitude of Radha, while worshipping Krishna and, thus transcend the gendered structure of love in patriarchy. This is a clear echo of the Tantric attitude toward female sexuality: "*Streemayanachajagat sarvamswayam tabattatha bhabet*" ("Consider the entire universe and your own self to be full of femininity") (*Mundamalatantra* 5/38). A male *Sahajiya* is called upon to ensure the orgasm of his female consort, as a part of his religious duty. The *Bauls*, *Sahebghanis*, *Balahadis*, *Kartabhajas* and numerous other sects, looked down upon and persecuted by high Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, continue to cultivate their more female-friendly attitude even today (Chakraborti, Barunkumar 1986; Chakraborti Sudheer 1985 and 1986). No wonder rural and labouring women in large numbers and, especially our sex workers are drawn towards these sects. The real sexual culture of our people, especially of our women, has literally gone underground. Expelled from 'high' literature, art, education and, culture in general, our sexual self-expression found a safe haven in the *Sahajiya* songs, under layers of metaphors and tropes and, in some temple sculptures, murals, paintings, folk songs and ballads. The elite of India, and of Bengal, still consider these texts to be stuff meant for the folklorists and/or historians of art alone and, confine their own women in a subordinate economic, political, cultural and sexual position.

Bengal came under the rule of the English East India Company in 1757. This was the time when stricter control of sex work happened to be one of the credos of Reformation in Europe. The European discourse of human rights was yet to graduate into a discourse of *The Rights of Woman* (Olympe de Gouges 1791) or of *Vindication of the Rights of Woman* (Mary Wollstonecraft 1792). When Europe produced these ideas, even the most advanced European civil societies were in no mood to accept them. What was happening in Bengal then? Vedic and Puranic Hinduism, already exposed to the various kinds of Tantric theories and practices and, to Islam and Sufism, came in contact with some ideas of European Enlightenment, here in Bengal. Within a couple of decades Bengal produced the first womanist man of our subcontinent – in the person of Raja Rammohun Roy, who penned his tract against the Bengali Hindu upper caste practice of burning live widows on the funeral pyres of their dead husbands, in the year 1818. A few years later he penned his “Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females According to the Hindoo Law of Inheritance” (1822). Schools for the education of girls were established in Kolkata in the 1840s. Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar published his first tract in defence of upper caste widow remarriage in 1855. The publication of John Stuart Mill’s *The Subjection of Women* (1869) created some ripples within the Bengali elite. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay wrote an excellent tract on women under its influence, however, he failed to reissue it after one reprint, when he was no longer under the spell of Mill. Vidyasagar continued to agitate against polygyny in the 1870s, but opined against legislating for prohibiting child marriage. The first university educated Bengali women appeared in the scene in the 1880s. Begum Rokeya penned her womanist utopia, the *Sultana’s Dream* in Kolkata, in 1905. In 1917 the Indian National Congress elected its first woman President – Annie Besant. The women of Madras obtained the right to vote in 1921, of Bengal – in 1925 and, of the rest of India – in 1929. The Indian parliament is yet to pass a bill stipulating even 33% representation of women in all elected bodies, and, to recognize our sex workers as a part of our service sector working class.

Despite some flashes of enlightenment, illumining a small section of the Bengali elite, most of the Bengali society still continues to wallow in a process of general civilisational decline.

The sexuality of the Bengali is in deep trouble. Sexual encounters tended (and still tend) to be a shame-ridden affair, a short stab of lust, devoid of love and passion. The Hindus are more than 80% of our population. According to the *Smritis* (law codes), *Puranas* (ancient and mythical lores) and *Panjikas* (almanacs), a pious Hindu husband should approach his wife sexually, only during her *Ritukul* (a period of 16 days within the menstrual cycle). However, sexual intercourse is forbidden on 6 (the first 4, the 11<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup>) of these 16 days. This leaves 10 days in a month for conjugal relations. Condoms were yet to arrive (and are even today hardly used) and, the coveted sons, they said, were conceived only on even nights—so the days of permissible familial sexual intercourse came down to 5. However, if these were the days for worshipping the gods and ancestors, then of course erotic pleasures were forbidden even in those days. Further, sexual intercourse in full moon or moonless nights would lead either to the birth of atheist sons or to a hell full of faces and urine. Sex in any case is out of question for most people during the day, in a society that still hardly has any concept of privacy (no Indian language equivalent of the word ‘privacy’ exists till date). Even at night, the moment of sexual arousal has to coincide with the auspicious moment indicated in the almanac (*Bishuddha Siddhanta Panjika 1412/2005-06: Ka 100, Kha 39*). In such a domain of almost zero sexuality even for the powerful and pious husband, the hapless wife cannot even dream of orgasm. No wonder that in spite of, or perhaps because of, these maddening controls, our known herstory was one veritable field day for our sex workers and their customers. Official sexual time in India indeed beats considerably slower than her political, economic or other forms of time (Kakar 1989). The picture varies marginally from caste to caste, class to class, region to region and, to a greater extent in the case of tribes living at a greater distance from the urban centres of culture, where each successive influx of rulers and laws – first from Central Asia and then from Europe – imposed ever newer layers of restrictions and hypocrisy. There exists a general disapproval of the erotic in all the currently dominant ‘official’ religio-social cultures of the land, wherein the life and practices of the Muslims (about 12%), Christians, Sikhs and others (each about 2%) are strongly influenced by the overwhelming (more than 80%) presence of the caste-ridden Hindus. Religio-cultural taboos and controls may be weakening among the youth, in the case of sexual expressions and, the almanacs are lamenting their deviations



from the astrologically ordained path (*ibid.*), yet familial controls still produce conflicts around sexuality, spoil it for many and, generally impoverish our sexual culture.

The situation is further compounded by a demographic imbalance. Save a few pockets along the Southern Coast Line, the Himalayas and, the Central Indian Tribal Areas, we have on an average, about 100 females short for every 1000 men owing to alarmingly high increase in female foeticide, among other factors (Sex ratio map. Map 3. Census of India 2001). In some areas of Northern and Western India, the gap is of 200 or more. In South Delhi, where the affluent sections of India's capital city live, there are 732 women for every 1000 men and, in some pockets of West, North-West and, North-East it is less than 700 women per 1000 men. Even a conservative estimate shows that for sheer demographic reasons alone, about 10% of the Indian males, cannot have monogamous familial sexual life, even if they wish to. Add to this, economic affluence or poverty, work related single migration, preponderance of arranged marriage, myriads of personal psycho-sexual orientations and, a host of other hitherto un-investigated factors, like, say, the high percentage of child marriages (70%) and, of children in child marriages (54% in the towns and 46% in the villages; UNICEF: India Statistics 2004), that contribute to our considerably large market for the buyers and sellers of sexual services at a price.

## II

It is with this inherited background and in these contexts that the sex sector emerged in the city of Kolkata, under the control of the English East India Company, since the 1690s. Though Reformation in Europe brought in stricter control of brothels, even their closure, some of the early colonial administrators understood, be it noted, that the life of a professional courtesan in India was not the same as that of a sex worker in England, nor were sex workers here looked down upon as a community, by all the other sections of the society. They had a special domain, relation with the rest of the society and, terms of exchange recognized even by the new colonial courts. Right up to the 1850s, courts in Kolkata issued summons against defaulting customers of courtesans/sex workers engaged with the promise of a regular monthly pay. Then came the war in far off Crimea as a bolt from the blue and, in conjunction

with the Victorian values of the imperial bureaucracy, changed the world of the Indian sex worker beyond recognition, once and for all (Chatterjee, Ratnabali 2004).

Terrified by the alarming number of British soldiers suffering from venereal diseases after the Crimean War, the rulers of Britain passed the Contagious Diseases Act in 1864. By and by it came to be enforced in the other parts of the empire. The Indian Contagious Diseases Act XIV of 1868 came into operation in Kolkata from 1 April 1869. It was amended a couple of times. The key element of this act was compulsory registration and medical examination of the sex workers, especially of those who were visited by the British soldiers in the regimental bazaars and nearby towns. It was through such act of registration that the Indian sex worker was enrolled as a colonial subject. A number of small booklets, like the *Beshya Guide* (Guide for the sex workers) in Bengali, were published in the regional languages, for their benefit. In response, many left the city. Whenever a sex worker was reported as an absentee from the periodical medical examination, a warrant for her arrest was immediately sent out. The friends and relatives of the absentee sex workers offered protest through *non-cooperation*, when chased by the police. Having endured the extremes of medico-police excesses, like disrobing in public and, use of metallic instruments for examining the existence of diseases, some sex workers committed suicide. Through a relentless game of chase and run with the colonial police, the Indian sex worker, once accepted and revered, then scorned yet tolerated, was finally branded as a criminal running away from a 'beneficial' law. A small part of the local elite became gradually more and more vocal against the excesses around the Act. The remaining greater part of the hypocritical Kolkata elite, the forefathers of our present rulers, took up cudgels in defence of their imperial masters and, vociferously campaigned for ghettoising our sex workers within the confines of places like Sonagachi. Some of the missionaries from England were horrified too, especially as they witnessed the sufferings of the swelling ranks of white sex workers. Their very existence was a matter of great embarrassment for the white rulers. The Act itself was not very effective either. In 1868 about 19.2% of the white soldiers in Kolkata were suffering from venereal diseases, in 1870 the percentage was reduced to 13.6; however, by the next year it was back to the previous level. The

demand for the suspension of the Act gained momentum in England. In the missionary discourse against the Act, the sex worker was eased out of her identity as a 'criminal', to be held up as a 'victim' of official discrimination. The contemporary rehabilitation lobby continues to trade with this label of 'victim hood' of the sex worker. The response of the elite among the sex workers of Kolkata of those days, however, stunned one and all. They submitted petitions against the Act and its enforcement. Between June and December 1869, when the police of Kolkata arrested some 1418 sex workers for violating the Act, 1527 sex workers from Kolkata and, 499 of them from the suburbs, petitioned against the Act and the police in the courts of law. Some of the policemen were sacked as the charges of misbehaviour, graft, violence and molestation levelled against them were proved. In 1864 there were about 30,000 sex workers in Kolkata, according to a report submitted to the government by the then health officer of the city. By 1870 about 6000 from among them were registered. The Act was suspended in Kolkata in 1883 and, finally it was scrapped in 1888 (Basu 2003). Officially, these steps curtailed the powers of the police and the army to indiscriminately arrest and punish the sex workers. The Indian sex workers solely reserved for the white soldiers were given the option to walk out. However, they were in a paradoxical situation in this moment of 'colonial liberation'. The pre-colonial norms were destroyed by the brutal police onslaught of the colonial rule. Their previous patrons had vanished into the horizons. The new Indian elite concurred with the English Christian missionaries and officially preferred to look upon them as 'victims' and, to set them up as 'objects of reform'. The English educated young Indian customers demanded that they show their health tickets. The sex workers of Kolkata realized that unless certified healthy, they can not hope to have any white or elite Indian customer. As colonial rule consolidated itself in our country, our sex workers fearful of losing their only source of income, by being officially 'deregistered', clung to the alien identities of either a 'criminal' or a 'victim', imposed upon them through the dominant metropolitan and colonial discourses, by holding up the already useless registration tickets, hoping to be recognized as colonial subjects (Chatterjee, Ratnabali 2004).

Volumes have been written about the devastating effects of myopic British imperial policies on Indian agricultural and

industrial life. However, very little has been written about the de-civilising and dehumanising effects of the British policies on the Indian sex sector. Historians, colonial, anti-colonial or post-colonial, are yet to recognize the existence of this sector, its people as fellow human beings and citizens on an equal footing and, its workers as a part of our service sector workers.

The officially reformist agenda of the new Indian elite, in respect of the sex sector, came dramatically to the fore in 1921. In that year some 350 sex workers of Barishal (now in Bangladesh) approached Gandhiji and, expressed their desire to work further for the cause of India's liberation from the British rule. They were already registered with the Indian National Congress in some capacity. Gandhiji told them point blank that they have no place in the society of the householders. They must leave their profession, renounce the world, and become nuns and, only then will they be able to serve the country (Sharma 2002). This is mind-blowing insensitivity, especially in the land of Kautilya and Vatsayana! First the decadent *Smritikaras* (author of codes) like Manu and, then colonial education, completely brainwashed the power operators of India, including the declared 'saints' among them, like Gandhiji.

It was also in 1921 that the League of Nations was persuaded to take up the issue of sale and purchase of women from Europe to the East. It was a rallying cry around which the racial pride of the colonial rulers could be organized. It developed into a full-scale enquiry into the conditions of sex work in the empires. In India neither the rulers, nor the local elite aspiring for political power, were concerned about the sex workers. Their concern was to prevent women from their own groups being channelled into the sex sector. Both the sides were interested in 'rescuing' those under 16 girls from the brothels, who were not "common prostitutes". Interestingly, the 'rescued' girls were often unwilling to be rescued. In one case the court had to intervene and uphold the girl's plea that she was being coerced rather than rescued. The desire to raid brothels grew stronger, especially after the Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1923 was passed. The League of Nations Committee on Trafficking in Women and Children said that in 1926 there were 20,000 Indian sex workers in Kolkata. The League demanded of all governments that they gather the data regarding various aspects of sex work in their respective countries. The Government

of India asked the Provincial Governments to report on the matter, especially on the methods of "rehabilitation" being used, heralding the birth of state-sponsored 'rehabilitation industry', in India. As a part of this exercise, the commissioner of police, Kolkata, collected the life histories of 50 sex workers in 1935. 66% of them were married and, of them 42% was either driven out of their husband's home or had left it for some reason. Marriage did not afford them any 'protection'. The element of physical force often luridly highlighted by the rehabilitation lobby was almost totally absent in the case histories of this survey sample. Some women ended up in the brothels via the route of elopement. When a married woman is in love with another man she falls through the familial 'safety net'. It was and is an equally grave misdemeanour for a widow to be in love with someone. Sometimes a family friend or an acquaintance brings a woman to the market of part time or full time sexual services (Chatterjee, Indrani 2004).

It is commonplace to treat sex work as the diametrically opposite of marriage; however, in life the two sectors functioned in a complementary manner. They grow into each other. The dominant discourses refuse to treat the housewives and sex workers as subjects, as agents, who have their own will; they are treated as objects of control, manipulation, protection, banishment, rescue or reform. The post-independence Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act of 1956, passed after the documents of the related international convention for the prevention of 'immoral' traffic were signed at New York on the 9<sup>th</sup> of May 1950, has further consolidated the grip of these dominant discourses.

The so-called reformist attempts to get rid of the sex workers of Kolkata often cloaked some economic reasons as 'civic' or 'moral' reasons. The city improvement trust was set up in 1911. The roads and tramways were expanded and extended. This drove up the value of real estates in the College Street, Cornwallis Street, Lower Circular Road and Shovabazar Street. The police received numerous petitions at that time stating that these streets needed "cleaning up". The attempt was partly successful. However, a larger portion of the women 'rescued' stated that they had no desire to retrace their steps. The 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Kolkata experience with police and non-police

survey and 'rescue' revealed a close nexus between familial oppression of women, their resultant desire to break free and, the sex sector.

India gained independence from the British rule in 1947, through harrowing religio-communal riots, leading to a partition of British ruled India into India-that-is-Bharat and Pakistan. In 1971 the eastern wing of Pakistan became Bangladesh. The present Indian state of West Bengal is the Indian part of old Bengal, located at the tip of the East Coast of India. Presently it is one of the poorer states of our country. Its capital Kolkata was once the capital city of British Ruled India and, functioned as the principal gateway for European Enlightenment ideas, as these poured into our land through a distorted colonial filter. It has been indicated earlier that it is here that the first seeds of the modern movement for women's emancipation fell upon a fertile cultural soil shaped by Bengal Vaisnavism, that had fore grounded women's love in devotee-deity relationship. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the rights of upper caste women remained a veritable battleground for the conservatives and reformers of the Bengal gentry. The names of Raja Rammohun Roy, Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay are well known all over India as champions of women's cause. Among the foremost authors of modern Bengali literature Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, Kshirodprasad Vidyabinod, Sharadindu Bandopadhyay, Manik Bandopadhyay, Premankur Atarhi, Satinath Bhaduri, Premendra Mitra, Banaphul, Buddhadev Bose, Mahasweta Devi, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Subroto Mukhopadhyay and many others, have on many occasions based their literary creations on the sufferings, joys, devotion and aspirations of our sex workers. It is true that these portrayals carried the marks of their origin in 'upper' caste patriarchal consciousness, yet they were instrumental in generating some empathy for our sex workers at least among a part of the Bengali intelligentsia.

The sex workers of Bengal on their part played a very important role in the development of modern Bengali culture, especially of Bengali theatre, throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, and in the development of our film industry in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. In those days social norms were against the

participation of 'upper' caste educated ladies as actresses on the professional and amateur stage and in film. The then illustrious actresses of the Bengali stage, Elokeshi, Golap, Shyama, Jagattarini, Binodini, Teenkari, Manadasundari and Indubala, were all sex workers. Indubala (1899-1984) acted in 55 dramas, 50 films and, had 280 discs to her credit as a singer. She was also the Founder President of the United Women's Council, perhaps the first organization of Kolkata sex workers. The Council headed by Indubala organized the first major conference of our sex workers on 28 July 1958, at Kolkata, to discuss and, to lodge protests against, the plans of the Government of India to evict sex workers from their work sites. Eminent educationists and jurists, even state and central cabinet ministers, chaired some of the sessions of the conference. The conference pleaded that the government should protect the inalienable human rights of our "[M] arginalized women living outside the pale of society." Nothing came of the conference resolutions and appeals. However, the organization grew and in time became a happy hunting ground for unscrupulous political operators. Indubala and her comrades were distressed. They appealed to the fellow sex workers to stop petitioning the government and, to come together for constructive work within the community, aimed at making the community self-reliant. In an open letter addressed to the sex workers they wrote:

*"We are living at a time when everybody is trying to stand on their own feet. Why should we not try the same? Since there is no room for us in the society of our country, we must build our own society. One by one we must establish our own schools, charitable hospitals, libraries, shops and, funds for helping the poor. To translate this noble desire into practice we need human power, money power and, strength of mind."*

No follow-up record of the subsequent activities of Indubala and her comrades has been preserved. Indubala died in 1984. Nobody could visualize at that time, that a Sonagachi Project will come up within a decade of her death, in the context of a raging AIDS pandemic, wherein many of the last wishes of Indubala and her comrades and friends will come true, within the next decade or thereabouts.

What can the sex workers of the world hope to learn from the herstorical experience of the sex workers of Sonagachi,

Kolkata, West Bengal, India? It is this that the sex workers belong to the society and, if the rest of the existing society does not like them, then the sex workers must engage, challenge and, change the structures of that society, to secure for themselves a place of dignity under the sun. They must educate the rest of the society as did Swapna Gayen, Secretary of DMSC, at a session of the World Social Forum (Mumbai) 2004, where she said:

*The sex workers come from the society where they were born and raised; the society comes to the sex workers as customers; yet the society remains good and the sex workers are considered to be bad. How come?*

This poser is not only for the Indians; it is also for the people of the rest of the world. That it has been articulated by a sex workers' leader from Kolkata merely reflects the rich, complex, at times very bright and, at others very dark heritage of our civilization and of its encounter with other civilizations. This experience offers us a singular lesson: We must not confront the world dogmatically with a new paradigm and say, here is the truth, kneel down before it! We should rather develop for the world new paradigms out of the ground realities of the world itself.

The overarching principles and values of the sex workers' projects, organization and movement in Sonagachi, Kolkata, West Bengal, India: of equal worth, equal liberty, equal political status, equal decision-making power, equal development, respect for diversity, individual agency, human dignity, collective bargaining, collective decision making, control and access over services and resources and, of taking sides – are all universal human values. These values and the more humane and egalitarian attitude to sexuality and sex work are the common heritage of the entire human civilization today. Still there is no gainsaying the fact that in their present form these values arose in the more developed class-divided societies of Europe. These are the values of the *homo aequalis*. The Bengali or the Indian, however, is still very much a *homo hierarchicus* (Dumont 1966). For more than a decade now the sex workers of Sonagachi, Kolkata, West Bengal, India are engaged in a daily battle to establish their equal rights in a stubbornly hierarchically ordered society. The overarching values of our sex workers' movement enumerated above reflect the aspirations of our people, especially of our women, of whom, in many senses,

our sex workers are in the van.

The story of our sexuality and sex work is also the story of or laborious, fumbling, groping, frustrating and exhilarating journey of trials-and-errors towards a desired establishment of these values. At times the governments of our own country and of the capitalist west pushed and shoved us along this path, at others they become obstacles. The most recent example of such an obstacle being the currently hostile attitude of the US government on the question of support to the human, civil and labour rights of our sex workers, who are fighting at the front lines of the global war against HIV/AIDS.

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